

POISON IN PRINT

DISCARDED DRAFT

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CHAPTER ONE

My worn leather soles echoed against the pavement in rapid succession as I tried and failed to outrun the turmoil of a morning crowd. Men and women hustled and bustled around me with little thought, wearing their worn, fraying suits and carrying their cracked leather handbags as their eyes remained on the ground, constantly averted from each other and more importantly averted from me—Because god knew the consequences if they were to actually look at me, especially for too long, in their minds they simply could not risk my response, just as they could not risk the response of anyone like me.

A young woman running around with a cat in her arms, more often than not they knew what that meant and in this case they were right.

“You could not be of any less help,” I anxiously hissed down to Nyx, the cat in question, as she blinked

lazily up at me. “A bird, a dog, a nimble little mouse—No, you have to be a twenty-pound cat,” I hissed, to which I was only rewarded with a lazy swish of her long, luxurious tail.

Typical. I sighed as we slowed to the stop, stuck at yet another crosswalk. The slow-moving procession of cars seemed to idle on the roadways, their long metal tailpipes leaking out a considerable amount of fumes. Lovely. I likely would have just barely missed this, if I wasn’t too busy lugging around Nyx, who was, as always, the least helpful creature on earth.

Next to me, a few older businessmen stepped away, but I paid them no mind as I turned down to Nyx, my voice shaped in a lower, harsher whisper. “I’m begging you, Nyx. A ferret, a parakeet—something lighter. You know that Professor Adams will be awfully sore if we do not get the jump on Quincy here. We cannot lose this reference book to Professor Avarelle,” I said, but the darn cat only purred, overly pleased with herself. In the background, a soft metallic clink was heard as the metal plate indicating whether pedestrians could walk was turned. “Fine then,” I said, looking down at her. “Have it your way.” My fingers loosened around the cat, and I could see the stark irritation far more than evident behind her gaze as she slipped from my fingers, twisting through the air to land on her feet and changing from the large, fluffy black Himalayan cat she had been to a tall, thin greyhound.

Her eyes looked up at me in loathing as the pedestrians pointedly avoiding her in a wide arc.

“Much better,” I informed her, patting her head in sarcastic delight. “You should be proud to have done such a good job with this one. I can barely tell the difference between you and an ordinary dog.” I nodded in delight to myself as I moved towards the crosswalk, knowing that she would soon stop her scowling and move to keep up—it was far from comfortable for a familiar to be far from her witch, after all.

Sure enough, Nyx came trotting after me as I crossed the street, not moving at anything near a good speed, but for the moment, it was enough. Just having her on four legs was better than nothing, especially considering what we were up against.

I tried to get her to move a little faster once we’d crossed the street by walking behind her and lightly patting at her haunches, but it did not do me much good. It was only by the grace of God that she moved, the *literal* grace of God.

“And though researchers have led us to believe that the familiar is not a creature of hell itself, one should know all too well that science often lies,” proclaimed a street preacher, another one of those end of the world fellas who stood atop a wooden milk crate and preached to the crowds, his head lifted pridefully and a smirk present on the side of his lips.

Never mind that familiars always had been and always would be, the church had its own opinion and just a few months ago they’d finally had their moment in the sun—an event that they’d been waiting for for centuries.

A man had killed his familiar.

Even thinking of it, I looked back to Nyx with a shudder, unwilling to imagine a world without her. Her dark, hooded eyes looked back at me as she walked ahead, and I wondered if she knew what I thought about.

If everyone had a familiar, perhaps it wouldn't have been such a news story. But only the magically gifted received familiars, and those beings came into existence when a human's powers came to fruition. Far too often, that happened with the upper class and socially mobile, but in my case, it happened in a poor town just off of Laxton, a city in which many claimed the magical renaissance was occurring. It was more than rare for the youngest of twelve humans, or 'dumplings' as some of the magical population derogatorily called them, to come into magic, and my parents were proud. Proud enough to work double shifts to send me to school, and proud enough to stand back when I was allotted entry into Laxton university.

They did not so much as show up at my entrance ceremony, nor the banquet held when it was announced that I was to be the brilliant Professor Adam's apprentice—a professor so well renowned that they were only rivaled by Professor Avarelle.

Professor Adams studied the mapping of the soul and was the man behind the science that the preacher proclaimed was built on lies.

I bit my tongue as we tried to pass the preacher by, annoyed that I practically had to push Nyx along the

pathway as she sought to more defiantly stand in front of him, staring him down. The glint in her eye said what my familiar could not; *go on, tell me I am evil.*

Everyone knew that the man that the church spoke so often about was ill, that no one in their right mind would kill their familiar. Despite that, people listened.

Working-class people, with stains in the creases of their cotton blue collar shirts, and shoulders that sat at a width girth. Dangerous people. People who I'd rather not cross.

I picked up the pace a bit more, lifting my head and trying not to make eye contact with anyone as I fought my way towards the row of shops that sat at the edge of the street, thankful that I was finally there. If I had my way, I wouldn't have had to be outside of Laxton during rush hour, not in a primarily human area. But such actions were necessary in order to beat out the likes of Professor Avarelle and his successor.

And I'd rather not spend the rest of my night roaming about. Especially when I'd finally done it.

"Everett Millner," I repeated the name of my date that night, if only to hurry my legs along. The ache of running still resonated all too loudly in my muscles and I more than needed that encouragement.

One of the best-looking boys at our university, and he had asked me out that night, not the other way around, so I needed to be sure that I got everything that I needed to do done early. God knows that if I did not get my professor's reference book that morning, then

I'd surely be punished with an assortment of chores that night.

Thankfully, I didn't see a hint of Quincy on the street, and it looked like the small bookshop's open sign was still swinging from being turned.

Murmuring a quick word of thanks to the universe, I gripped the doorknob and yanked it open, slamming my back against the wood as I jerked it shut and closed my eyes, a long, tired breath escaping from me. I had made it. I was there.

I could see Nyx shaking her head at me from the ground, her features shrinking as she stooped over and morphed once again. Within a matter of seconds, a small black bird hopped on the ground where the greyhound once sat. A small black bird that would have been helpful about five minutes prior, when I was toting around a heavy Himalayan cat. "You really do not want me to go on that date with Everett, do you?" I growled, to which Nyx only cocked her head innocently.

Oh, familiars, they really were quite a pain. I snorted to myself, brushing the few strands of messy red hair out of my eyes and behind my ears before putting my shoulders back and holding my head up high. My professor had taught me that people who looked sure of themselves were hardly ever swindled, and so I always tried to look confident. Whether I actually did that, I could not say.

Holding the strap of the large leather satchel around my shoulders a bit more firmly and taking my first step

into the bookshop, I was struck by how full it all looked, like no one had ever bothered to come in. A shop in Laxton would never look like that one, there would be too many gaps to count and you could look through the shelves like windows, but I suppose that was the difference between the city hosting the world's premiere magical institute and anywhere else—people read in Laxton like it was a religion, and scarcely ever did you find someone without a book in their bag.

The fact that mine felt so empty at that moment was just owing to a rather large wad of money in my coat pocket, one that I had fingered several times over. I could not lose it. There was no way that I could afford the book on my own.

My eyes scanned over the bookshelves as I passed them by, taking note of the several strange, unfamiliar titles. Fiction; I hadn't been able to read an actual novel in a long time, not since I'd gone to university. A part of me felt jealous of the people in the small offshoot town of Laxton, they had a fine selection of things to read, and I bet my hat that amongst them probably sat my favorite—a series of detective novels written by a woman about a rather charming older man and his daring sidekick, one in which they went venturing across the English countryside solving murders. I knew England would likely have an enormous problem if that many people were dying in their rural areas every week, but those books definitely made me yearn for travel.

Maybe when I finished my apprenticeship.

“Though, I will likely be rewarded Professor Adam’s office,” I mused, since he was getting quite old indeed and has assured me that it all ended with me. I would be the last under his tutelage, just as Quincy would be the last under Avarelle’s.

Ugh, Quincy.

I frowned to myself at the thought of him and tried to focus on anything else, instead calling the name of the shop keep I’d spoken to over the phone in an attempt to get moving already. “Braxley?” I called. “Mister Braxley?” Surely, he had to be there, or at least someone did.

But there was no response, not even a rustle of paper.

I frowned as I took another step into the store, squinting at the shelves. The further that we got from the door, the more interesting the shelves became. Mr. Braxley had stated that he was not a practitioner of magic, but he obviously could not declare himself to be lacking interest. Amongst the shelves, a few hints of his true passions laid; small droplets of preserved amber that inspired the same cooling feel as looking at Nyx, each hosting smaller, long since dead familiars. Typically, when a warlock passed, his familiar passed as well and degraded at a far more rapid rate, but there were some ways to preserve them.

Not that I knew much about them, since my Professor much preferred to perform his experiments on living animals, rather than wait around like Avarelle’s lab to experiment on familiars whose owners

had passed and claim the bodies. We had a few living familiar subjects as well, ones whose magicians had consented, but Professor Adams was nowhere near as morbid and cruel as Avarelle. At least in my opinion.

Braxley had to be a fan of Avarelle, or at least, it seemed like he was. Braxley was one of the few scientists in the world capable of preserving familiars, and those?

I paused, ignoring the weight of Nyx landing on my shoulders as I took in the sight of a taxidermied tabby cat sitting amongst the shelves, its glossy eyes still holding that swirl of murkiness that so many familiars had. If I tricked myself, I could almost believe it to be breathing. My eyes took in its beautiful white markings and the tawny brown of its paws. Its eyes were a beautiful hazel, with an astonishing blue towards the pupil that seemed almost familiar, and for a moment I could barely speak, only manage a light, barely audible murmur. "Braxley," I called halfheartedly, my fingers twitching with anticipation as I reached towards the animal, missing the slightest wobble of its chest—

A scream rang out of me as the cat leaped from its perch and dived for my shoulder, aiming for Nyx.

I stumbled forward into the shelves as Nyx dived out of the way and transformed again, her wings lengthening from that of a black starling into a crow as she flitted her way up to the upper stacks. The cat's claws just barely grazed me as she landed on my shoulder before she leaped off of me, twisting in the air and somehow rolling her body over at the last minute

before becoming a hawk and narrowly missing the impact of the ground. She spread out her wings to turn upwards and I stumbled into the shelves, letting out another exclamation of shock before falling into one shelf and feeling it wobble beneath me.

My heart sounded in my chest and my legs left me as, thankfully, the bookcases turned out to be secured. Unthankfully, this made it hurt a lot more when I fell into them, bumping my chin on the way down.

Great.

My hand rose to wipe at the trickle of blood that escaped me as I winced in pain. I could hear the scratching of claws and the scrambling of animals on top of the shelves as I regarded myself and my aching limbs, hissing in irritation as my chin continued to bleed and my body screamed in protest. I pulled my limbs in closer to myself, closing my eyes momentarily before I heard a sharp squawk of pain.

“—Nyx!” I yelled, scrambling up to my feet and nearly falling over again in the process as I braced myself on the shelves and managed to bash my head once more.

A hand caught my waist, and I heard an irritated huff escape the owner as he pulled me to my feet, his familiar voice sounding out firmly in a stern bass not unlike that of a chiding father, “Aoide,” he chided, and I wasn’t sure why I was even surprised anymore.

A hard scowl slid across my face at that name, and it only grew harder as I shoved myself away from my aide only to spot the book clutched in his other hand—my

book clutched in his other hand. "You," was all I managed to say, and then his eyes were upon me, his breath leaving him in a firm snort.

I'd do anything not to have those brown eyes look upon me for once. I could feel the unyielding sneer upon his features as he fully realized who I was, undoubtedly unaware of what girl exactly he had saved until that moment. If he had known it was me, he wouldn't have bothered.

Our familiars got into scuffles often enough.

He raised his hand expectantly as Aoide, that was her name, finally came flapping out of the stacks, this time as a far larger eagle that swooped on by. His hand raised expectantly as she passed him and, just as he assumed would happen, a small, dazed bat was deposited in his hand, her head lulling about his forefinger. Nyx. "I believe this belongs to you, Diana."

"I should have known that it would be you," I began, but he merely ignored my poisonous tone and clutched Nyx's feet between his finger and thumb, looking as if he was presenting garbage to me, rather than my familiar. "You know, you should really try to control your monster," I spat, snatching Nyx up all the same and keeping my hand wrapped around her torso as she gave a defiant squeak of protest. She definitely wanted to go back into the fight. "However you've gotten this far with a familiar attacking everybody's—"

"—Just yours," he interrupted, rolling his eyes as he turned on a dime and began to walk back up through the stacks. Aoide, his familiar, stalked out from the

shadows in the form of a cat again. I could only glare as he paused for the slightest moment to greet her, the damned thing purring in response. "You know, some familiars have a prey mentality," he said. "Aoide senses it. It's only in her nature to hunt."

"Oh, that predator and prey nonsense—You know that's not true, Quincy," I replied, storming after him and stamping my feet without a care in the world how childish I appeared, not with him. I couldn't care less what Quincy whatever-his-name-was thought of me. He knew that well enough. "It's a story for girl's magazines and love columns," I spat, "which you know well enough are all poppycock and nonsense."

"And yet so many young girls subscribe. Perhaps you should consider humoring them, Miss Walton. It might do you some good," he said, sounding quite tired of me, as if I was the one whose familiar had damned near killed his!

Of course, Nyx looked fine, but that was far from the point.

I glowered at Quincy's back as he walked away from me, taking in the tight curls on the back of his head and the familiar, high set of his well-defined shoulders. Quincy had something to him, I would admit, that would have been the slightest bit appealing if he had been anyone but himself.

A healthy slimness and an entirely unhealthy height, with long, pointed fingers that always seemed to tap to an annoying beat, and constantly rolled cuffs that always seemed to disregard the designated uniform of

Laxton University. He looked effortless and unworried at all points, which was a trait that I could admittedly envy, since much of my harried existence had been marked by my need to try as hard as possible as frequently as possible, and never let a single crack show.

If Quincy had cracks or flaws, he likely just plastered over them with a charming, well-timed smile, and went about his business. Everyone loved Quincy. Save for me.

"I can feel you seething," he said as he approached a bundle of bags nearest the cash register, a rolled receipt sitting upon the tabletop beside them as if to inform me he'd already paid for it all—curses. "What is it I have done today, my dearest darling Diana?" He said, casting a slow, evaluating look over his shoulder as if to ask me.

As if he needed to ask me.

"My book," I curtly informed him, to which he only tsked in amusement.

"Ah, he had said that he was holding this for both Adams and Avarelle," he said, hoisting the book up in the air. "A shame. It looks like I have come first..." He knew then. Just by looking at him, he knew. Of course he did. One would have to be blind not to know just how important that book was to our research.

I felt the bills in my pocket and calculated my additional savings. With careful eating and even more careful reading, not wasting the electric within my small, cramped apartment and rather reading by

Gaslamp in the corners of the library past closing hours, perhaps I could afford to buy him out—

“Not for sale,” Quincy informed me with a single glance back. “I can see where your mind is headed but, unfortunately for you, we study the same thing, and gaining this book could put our research well ahead of track by three months.”

“And us behind by three months,” I replied, straining to peer over his shoulder. “We’ve been searching high and low for that book. Surely there’s a price.”

“Not one that you’re willing to pay,” he replied with that same irritating smirk he always had. My god, was he condescending. I scowled, glaring down at his legs as his familiar, that smug little cat, looked back at me with the same knowing glance.

“Surely with recent news, you know how important our research is,” I tried, tearing my eyes away from his familiar back to him and noting how he shook his head, the slightest chuckle bubbling in his throat. He knew how to irritate me like no one else. “If you’ve gone the same way I have, then surely you’ve heard the soapbox preachers—”

“—I drove, actually,” he informed me, already picking up his bags, something that I most certainly could not allow. He did so leisurely, taking his time to relish in my defeat. I wrinkled my nose as he raised his eyebrows at me, his lips only ticking slightly further upwards. “Perhaps next time you should choose your mentors more carefully, maybe one that’s a little more careful with money.”

I glared, my hands twitching to just seize up the book and run away with it already. He seemed to sense that, tsking to himself as he bent over with it in his hands and reached for his bag. “—We can come to an agreement,” I said, gripping his wrists to stop him from putting it away as I looked at him with pleading eyes. “They’re talking about Arthur Malay, the man who killed his familiar. You know how important our research is...”

Quincy raised a single eyebrow as he looked down at my clawing grip, not so much as bothering to respond as I stepped closer. At the most, I might have heard a slight huff, but nothing more than that.

“Further funding is going to be granted to the study that produces the most evidence,” I rationalized, “and as I will be graduating this year and Adams will be retiring...” Nothing. Absolutely nothing. “I will do *anything*,” I tried, emphasizing the word anything in complete and utter defeat. I’d probably end up doing laundry or something else mundane for weeks with that, but it seemed to catch his attention. He looked back at me quickly, his brows furrowing.

Quincy clicked his tongue, not moving to remove my hand from him, but straightening across from me, his eyes watching me closely and his tall frame taking a single step towards me in a way that almost made me believe I had his pity. Oh, I had never wanted it before, but I so badly needed it then. My lips wobbled as I stepped forward, hoping beyond reason he might give in.

His hand moved to the bottom of my jaw, his fingers gripping my chin, and he tilted my face upwards so that I could look him in his dark, foreboding eyes, his tongue moving slowly across his lips. For a moment, we stood there. His eyes connected with mine; a million things being communicated between them. Loathing, mainly, but a few things that I couldn't quite understand.

Until he spoke again.

"Better luck next time," he whispered. And then he dropped my chin and stepped back just as quickly, a stain of scarlet visible against his skin.

Ah.

"You've done a bad job healing that," he proclaimed, rubbing the smudge of blood between his fingers until it disappeared, somehow ignoring the subtle warming of my ears. "And you've forgotten that I graduate this year as well," he stated, shaking his head to himself as he pulled my hand from his wrist and turned to put the book away. "Selfish," he tsked, looking at me with a fake, pointed frown. "Lucky you, I'm kind enough to heal the unfortunate," he said in amusement, and sure enough, my chin had stopped bleeding. He had the nerve to look proud.

Oh, if only murder were legal. Quincy had no reason to be so vile, not that I knew of, and yet he always was, and always towards me. I frowned at him as he tightened the leather strings of his birdie, finally hoisting it and the assortment of other ones onto his shoulders, his hand slipping behind him to grip a thick,

smudged newspaper and present it to me, slapping it into my hand that still lingered in the air if only to mock my shock.

“I figured you would be here. A little birdie told me all about the book that you were looking for,” Quincy said, looking all too pleased at my reaction. “For you,” he insisted, almost as if he knew I did not have the time to grab the paper that morning and was so kind and considerate as to remember it. The headline made it obvious enough that was not that case, that he had seen it and planned this. A hint of a sharp canine appeared as he took in my facial expression, whispering in my ear in a final, cruel move as he passed me by; “say hello to Everett for me, won’t you?”

As if I would have had the chance.

Professor Edmund Adams Work Called into Question as Investigations Continue into Arthur Malay’s Alleged Familiar Slaying. It would not be an easy day in Professor Adam’s lab, to say the least.

